The Time of Salvation

March 8th, 2020

2nd Week of Lent

“It is illogical for a priest to call in the doctor”—these words come from the novel *The Plague* by Albert Camus that depicts a rat infestation and epidemic. One must align with faith or reason and deal with the consequences. Though it is a beautiful novel filled with keen philosophical insights, perhaps its central dilemma oversimplifies real life and history. In the year 1905, Lu Xun decided to abandon his medical studies, and become a literary physician instead. This was after viewing a photograph of a soldier about to behead a man accused of being a spy in the Russo-Japanese War. There are illnesses that science deals with—infectious diseases, deficiency diseases, hereditary diseases, and physiological diseases. There is another kind of illness, however—the kind of illness suggested by the photograph that had such an impact on Lu Xun; this is existential and spiritual disease. In the gospel reading today, Jesus also distinguishes between the physical and the spiritual: “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6); “No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man” (John 3:13). The context of this discourse is a visit; Nicodemus comes to Jesus to find answers: “Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’” (John 3:1-2). Nicodemus does not really pose a question here. To answer the unsaid question, however, Jesus speaks of rebirth and a cure: “‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’” (John 3:3); “‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (John 3:5); “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14-15). Nicodemus the student believes he is coming to a divine teacher, but discovers that he has come to see a divine physician.

Life has been, at different stages of philosophy, religion, literature and history, portrayed as a disease. Though modern science has discovered the tremendously important role of microbes in shaping and helping life, the other view has not necessarily disappeared. It is in modern literature rather than ancient literature that it has grown; anthropologists even study the subject (Michael Herzfield, “Closure as Cure: Tropes in the Exploration of Bodily and Social Disorder” in *Current Anthropology,* Vol. 27, No. 2, April 1986). One need only consider how many zombie apocalypse films or books about dystopic contagion that exist. Modernity thus echoes antiquity; in the last words of Socrates, life itself is the disease (Plato, Phaedo). Somewhere deep down inside our souls, we cannot escape the suspicion that we are in the midst of a plague, that life is broken, diseased, or is itself something destructive or pestilent. Existence is both friend and enemy; it is our cure and our plague. Only a few years after Camus published *The Plague,* Jean Giono published *The Horseman on the Roof—*a historical novel set in Provence in the Napoleonic Era. Angelo, the main character, travels through the countryside and through towns ravaged by disease. During his peregrinations, he meets a noblewoman, and they share a platonic friendship and mutualism, traveling from place to place together to survive. When his companion points out the distance people keep when they speak, Angelo, realistic about the impact of the plague on society, says: “Nowadays it’s preferable for people to keep away from each other. I dread the death that lurks in the coat of the passer-by. And he dreads the death that’s in mine” (Jean Giono, *The Horseman on the Roof,* tr. Jonathan Griffin, New York: North Point Press, 1995, 368). Later on, near the end of the novel, Angelo meets an old doctor who has some unique (read *outré*) views on medicine and society. The doctor compares the spread of infection to proselytism. First, he says, “It isn’t chloride the towns are short of…They’re short of everything; at all events, of everything necessary to resist a fly, especially when that fly doesn’t exist, as is the case…I’ve practiced medicine for over forty years. I know perfectly well that cholera isn’t the outcome of pure imagination. But if it spreads so easily, if it has what we call this ‘epidemic violence,’ that’s because by the continual presence of death it enhances everybody’s congenital egoism. People die, literally, of egoism” (394); “Now melancholia…is claiming more victims than the cholera. Let’s pass over the fact that it kills—and kills on a scale people never realize, because its victims don’t display green bellies all along the streets...Melancholia turns a certain part of society into a company of living dead, a *cemetery above ground*” (396). As the old doctor remarks, disease is indeed terrible, but it is the context of the disease that reveals greater diseases in humanity—egoism and melancholia, for example. The physical disease in the novel, perhaps analogous to the production of antibodies, brings out good anomalies in the spiritual disease—the courage, patience, hope, mercy, and kindness that the protagonists show for each other and for strangers. That is *agape,* or pure love.

Nicodemus goes in search of teaching, and eagerly hears his teacher, partially acknowledging the authority and wisdom of Jesus. Nevertheless, Nicodemus comes at night, to avoid being publically associated or infected by the man of Galilee. And he does not really pose a question. Nicodemus does not pose a question because he does not know what the problem or the illness is. Jesus may very well be the cure, but Nicodemus is oblivious to what is being cured or how. As Jesus would say in the gospel of Luke: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:31-32). Nicodemus does not know that he is sick. When Jesus tells him to be born again or born from above, he jokingly asks: “‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’” (John 3:4). He tries to dismiss the prescription. To be born again—this suggests that someone was born wrong or became wrong after birth. One of the things we have learned from the coronavirus is that, with its long incubation period, many carriers of the disease do not even have symptoms while carrying it on to other places and people. When life seems good, when all of your needs are met, when you are safe and free, when you have access to the good things that many in the world do not have, when you have never had to conform to any particular regime or discipline, when society gives free reign to most of your desires and indulges them, it might be difficult to know that you are existentially or spiritually sick. It might be easy to forget that all have sinned (Romans 3:23) and all will die and face judgment (Hebrews 9:27). As the apostle writes, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

Nothing better illustrates the difference between awareness and oblivion of one’s spiritual health than the tenth chapter of the gospel of Mark. Here, Jesus asks the same question twice: “‘What is it you want me to do for you?’” (Mark 10:36, 10:51). The first time, he addresses James and John. The second time, he is speaking to blind Bartimaeus. James and John want to be seated beside the Lord in glory; Jesus has no answer for their request. Day after day, they had seen the poverty, leprosy, despair, blindness, brokenness, paralysis, epilepsy, muteness, deafness, sinfulness, demoic possession and the general lostness of the people Jesus administered to and cared for, the lost sheep that he loved, and their one great request was about their seating arrangements in the new kingdom. Blind Bartimaeus simply says, “‘My teacher, let me see again.’” (Mark 10:51). Jesus restores his sight, saying: “Go, your faith has made you well” (Mark 10:52)—a phrase that occurs frequently in the gospels. The faith of Bartimaeus relates to several things—his awareness of his defect, his faith in the physician and need of help, and then his response after the cure: “He regained his sight and followed him on the way” (Mark 10:52). In our relationship with God, we often do not acknowledge what the problem is, or we do not know what the problem is. During Lent, we give up things or make resolutions. Perhaps, one of the things we should do is to ask God what the real problem is within us. Are we misguided like James and John? Or are we sincere and humble like Bartimaeus? And if we have not yet followed Jesus, if we have not yet given our lives to God, perhaps that is where we need to begin. Bartimaeus was honest; he wanted to recover his sight. Seeing is intrinsically good; there is no mystery there and nothing wrong with the request. And yet, at some point, Bartimaeus wanted more than just his sight; he wanted his sight in order to have a relationship with Jesus and serve others alongside Jesus. The sight is but a means for the full cure—which is life in Christ. And this hints at our disease. Our disease is the need for salvation. Our time of repentance should be a time to awaken to this need of saving; to consider the free gift of salvation and what we are being saved from. And to remember that Jesus offers that salvation. The only cure for life is more life, and this life is in the love of God that is shown through Jesus Christ. Jesus says: “‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:16-17). One can look at medicine labels and guess what is ailing a person. A person taking hyoscine might have spasms. Someone taking aspirin might have an inflammation or pain. A person taking antibiotics is fighting an infection. What does the Son of God cure? In presenting the cure, Jesus also presents the existential diagnosis. Life is not the disease, but life without God is perishing. Life is not the disease, but a life without love is not life. Without the love of God, one has not really lived, one has not grasped the meaning of life. Jesus brings the cure for sin and death. Through the cross, we have been released from the two worst verdicts a human being can receive. First, that we have brought harm into this world through our sin. That we are not merely imperfect, we are sinful. Our disease is sin. Second, we are going to die. Whether spiritually, theologically, causally or symbolically, or all at once, our death comes on the coat-tails of our sin. Jesus has come to cure that sin, to replace sinfulness with holiness, to replace shame with confidence, to replace brokenness with completeness, to replace loneliness and selfishness with love and mercy, to vanquish mortality with eternity. When we look to Jesus, we are like the victims of the snake bites in the Book of Numbers who gaze on the bronze serpent; we are looking up at the Crucified Lord who sacrificed all to sanctify all. And our faith in Jesus makes us well.